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At CIA, North was well-received, though his claims often were not

By Jim Drinkard
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Lt. Col. Oliver L. North's engaging personality won him friends at the Central Intelligence Agency, but his tendency toward exaggeration and melodrama kept even those who liked him skeptical about things he told them, according to agency officials.

In congressional testimony released yesterday, the CIA's chief of overseas covert operations, Clair George, was asked about a time last year when North, the fired National Security Council aide who ran much of the Iran-contra operation, offered to sell the CIA private airplanes being used to resupply the Nicaraguan rebels.

"God bless poor Colonel North," George said.

"Everything was his. The world is mine. I'm going to see the President. I'm going to see the king. I'm going to fly down to Central America and have a private conference. How would you like some tickets to a Redskins game?"

"... Colonel North calls me up and says, 'How would you like to buy my airplanes?' ... I'm not so sure he could even produce any airplanes."

But George said North had endeared himself to the late CIA Director William J. Casey, in part because he was "action oriented" and reminded Casey of his own exploits during World War II with the Office of Strategic Services, the military precursor to the CIA.

"Oliver North ... had guts in approaching anybody, anywhere, any time, in any conditions, without any concern about his title, rank. You know, we all grow up that you don't just storm into the CEO's office the

third day with the company, and Ollie did it. Bill Casey liked Ollie North. We all did."

Another agency official, Central American task force chief Alan Fiers, testified that he could not judge whether to believe Casey or North on a key point of whether Casey knew about the diversion of Iran arms proceeds to the contras.

"I never knew Colonel North to be an absolute liar, but I never took anything he said at face value, because I knew that he was bombastic and embellished the record and threw curves, speedballs and spitballs to get what he wanted," Fiers said.

"I have seen Colonel North play fast and loose with the facts, and I think the record will substantiate that. But ... there was a lot of fact in what he said, too."

Asked whether North had ever given him false information, Fiers said, "I would assume he did," although he couldn't recall specific instances. "I know there were lots of times I suspected he was putting the spin on something that wasn't exactly the way it was, an attempt to influence the way things come out. He dropped names a lot."

Fiers and George testified in private to the Iran-contra committees the first week of this month. Transcripts were released Tuesday and yesterday, with sensitive portions blacked out.

George said North was constantly coming up with plans for various covert actions, but that many of them were "harebrained."

And he said he did not believe at least two things North had told congressional investigators: that Casey had directed North to set up an "off-

the-shelf" covert operations capability outside normal government channels, and that Casey had given him a suicide pill to take in case he was taken captive during a May 1986 trip to Tehran.

The CIA has strict rules, "like the controls on nuclear weapons," for issuance of suicide pills, George said. "When you talk about a lethal pill to me, we are talking about something that is cyanide that will kill you on the spot. And I tell you, William Casey would not suggest or give Oliver North suicide pills."

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